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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Karen Arnold, 63, Cedar Rapids
Karla Ice
2705 Johnson Ave. NW, Cedar Rapids, IA 52405
2/16/2011**

Karla Ice: This is an interview with Karen Arnold. She lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The location of the interview is at her home in Cedar Rapids. The date is February 16, 2011 and the time is about 10 minutes after 2:00. My name is

Karla Ice and Karen and I have met before at a Bible study fellowship group. The purpose of this interview is that it is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. And, Karen do we have your consent to have this interview recorded?

Karen Arnold: Yes.

Ice: Okay, very good. To start with, do you want to just give your age and where you were born, and did you have brothers and sisters, that sort of thing?

Arnold: I'm 63 years old. I was born in Manchester, Iowa. I'm the sixth daughter of Joseph and Armella Reese. I have five sisters and two brothers. My youngest brother has been gone since '72. And, I grew up on a farm near Coggon, Iowa. I lived there until I was 21 years of age and then moved to Cedar Rapids, and I've been in Cedar Rapids ever since. And, I've been married for 40 years. I have one daughter named Linda, and four grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Ice: Okay, very good. And, what was the reason for your blindness and how old were you when you became blind?

Arnold: Well, I was blind in the right eye from birth from Coats' disease, which I just found out affects males only, and it's very rare. It's non-hereditary. It has also signs of bleeding behind the eye, detached retina, which I did have, and it also had cataracts, which I did have. And, then they said, almost usually, they have the eye removed, and that's it.

Ice: Okay. And so, that started in your right eye and then eventually you lost sight in the left also?

Arnold: I lost...I went legally blind, let's see, I was 28. And, then I lost my eyesight completely at the age of 40 going on to 41 years of age.

Ice: And, that must have been quite an adjustment to you.

Arnold: Yes, it was. It took me a while to get through it. You know, I was very, very, very depressed at the time, and there was really only one thing that really got me through it was listening to a certain movie that I had...The Sound of Music. It just made me feel better. So, I think spiritually with God behind me that that's how I got through the whole thing.

Ice: Now, were you the only child in your family who was blind?

Arnold: Yes.

Ice: It didn't affect other members of your family.

Arnold: No.

Ice: And, how did that affect your childhood?

Arnold: Well, it affected it by, my parents, sometimes they felt like they were kind of putting me aside because they didn't think I could learn, especially in the housework, like

baking and stuff, 'cause mom wouldn't teach me. But, I know that my parents loved me, but also they, you know, kind of pushed me aside. I never learned how to drive because of my eyesight problem, but that didn't really bother me 'cause I wasn't really thrilled about it. So, otherwise, everything else went fine. I mean, I had fun with my brothers and sisters at home, and we grew up together and stuff like that. Of course, I am a twin. My twin was not affected by the disease.

Ice: Okay. Any other things you want to share about your childhood?

Arnold: I did go to public school for, like, kindergarten and in 10th grade I went to a Catholic school, but I had a hard time reading because of my eyesight problem. I could only read with one eye, and studying was very hard for me. I struggled through school through the grades, but I had to work hard for it. Otherwise, I don't know what else to say.

Ice: Okay, good. Then after you became blind you went to the Orientation Center in Des Moines for training?

Arnold: Yes, that was from January to December of 1989. I learned Braille. I learned cane travel. I also did woodworking. I made a five foot by six foot bookshelf out of walnut, and I did sew a dress there. And, I learned a lot of new friendships and how to get along with my blindness through all of that and to adjust through the blindness, because I was only blind for...totally blind for two months when I went there and it took a little while to get used to being blind.

Ice: And, what about employment? Probably you were employed before you went to the Orientation Center, or this was afterwards?

Arnold: I was employed afterwards. I worked from 1998 to 2000. I worked at APAC taking orders for different companies by computer. We had also other blind people...four blind people there, and we did take in orders for FTD flowers, orders for Sears and their catalogues, and then AARP for Hartford Insurance.

Ice: Okay. So, did the company provide some adaptive equipment?

Arnold: Yes, through the Department for the Blind. That's how I got my JAWS system speech program, and then I also got a Braille display to be able...when I would type something on the computer, it would show what I had typed in and see if I had typed it right, which gave me the confidence to do the job correctly and not try to make too many mistakes.

Ice: Okay. So, the Braille display actually has a Braille output that you can feel as you're typing in?

Arnold: Yes.

Ice: Okay. And, you use computers. Do you use computers in your home life also?

Arnold: Yes, I do. I place orders through the websites. I talk to people by email. I download books for my digital player. It's just a new way of life to be able to find things on the computer, to be able to do things. Without it I would be sittin' here doing nothin'.

Ice: Okay. What are some of the kinds of books that you particularly like to read, and is there a good selection available for you?

Arnold: Yes, there is. We download books through the NLS Library website, which is a National Library Service for the blind, and then we also can download books, or order books through the Department, which it makes it very, very applicable; because years ago we couldn't do that. We had to call our reader.

Ice: Okay. And, now you have special adaptive equipment on your computer that enables you to hear...the readers to you?

Arnold: Yes, I use the JAWS system. It's to read our material. It tells me what I'm typing; it tells me when I do make a mistake; it helps me to change it and it tells me where I'm at on the computer. Without the speech and without the sound I wouldn't be able to do anything.

Ice: And, there's something called ZoomText also, do you use that?

Arnold: No, I don't.

Ice: Okay. And, you still do some reading in Braille also?

Arnold: Oh yes. Without Braille...that opens up another world to me, especially when I read my Bible, I mean. Word by word, you know what God is saying, and you can find the verse by verse with your digital and with the Bible; on tape you can't do that.

Ice: Okay, and so a Braille Bible...how many volumes?

Arnold: There's 18 volumes.

Ice: Okay, so that's like two or three shelves of a bookcase?

Arnold: Well, I have it all on one shelf; a long shelf, yes. It would take two shelves usually.

Ice: So, that takes a lot of space, but it's something you can't do without?

Arnold: That's right.

Ice: Yes. What about some other things that you use around the house. How do you like keep track of recipes and things, do you Braille for those, or?

Arnold: I use Braille for the recipes. I've got them in folders and divided by categories. I also use Braille. I have my own...I have like three recipe boxes and that's my address and phone number boxes, and then I also Braille cards to wrap around canned goods to know what's what. I Braille my spices. That's how I know.

Ice: Okay, I was going to ask about that, too. And, what about experiences with raising children or taking care of your grandchildren?

**Arnold: Well, it could be difficult at times. They would like to play tricks on me, but usually they weren't too bad. But, this one instance where I had them in for time-out, and they would tap my head and, "Hi grandma...bye grandma."
(Laughing) But, otherwise they weren't too bad to take care of.**

Ice: Okay. And, what about your involvement in the community, organizations that you belong to?

Arnold: Oh yes. I belong to the Linn county Support Group. We've been going for about 15 years now, and it's for men and women that are blind or visually impaired or legally blind. We have meetings once a month over at the 16th Avenue Grill and it's like a fellowship, but we also usually invite people to speak, you know, from different places, like the Linn County Bus, the Aging Services, places like that to show us what we have available in our community. And, then the other one is our VIP, which is through the Bethany Lutheran people and we have discussions...it's more biblically-based/spiritually based, but we also sing songs and things like that. Sometimes we also have people come about things, too. We had a fella from where they have facts about Cedar Rapids, you know, the historical place/museum, you know, we had people from there and we had people from, oh, I can't think of the other place. But, they do bring in people to explain things about Cedar Rapids.

Ice: And, I believe you said you're also on a national church council.

Arnold: National Church Conference for the Blind. I'm on the Board for that. I was elected through our meetings last year. We meet at a hotel and it's different every year. This year we'll be in the Cleveland, Ohio area, but I'm just a representative and we help to advertise through different magazines. They check out different sites for the years ahead. We decide on the money and how it's going to be spent, and then they decide on what they're going to talk about during the conference. We just had our last; the recent conference was up in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

15:00

Ice: Okay. So, when you travel out of town for something like that, do you have any issues with that as a blind person?

Arnold: It could be scary, but I usually take an airplane and they're really helpful from both ends. You just tell them that you need help all the way through and they bring people to guide you through the airports. I have never had any problems, which I really enjoy traveling. So, be never scared to fly or go by train. They always make sure there's somebody to meet you at the other end.

Ice: Well, very good. I think you mentioned there's a camp that you go to in Texas? Is that the same church group?

Arnold: Oh yes. No, it's not. It's through the Gospel Association for the Blind in Florida. We meet once a year. It's coming up in May of 2011. We fly into Houston. They tell us and make sure we have our luggage very well identified. I have like orange tape on my suitcase, even though it's black, so they can identify it. Then they always have somebody to meet us, and then they take us to camp. And, during camp, we have Bible study during the morning, and then like a service at night to bring in people who are not saved. That's the whole purpose of camp is bringing the unsaved in. And, we also have one day we go out on a tour somewhere. Last year we went to, in 2010, we went to a lake and had lunch on the boat and then people went down, like, a tube into the lake, and from the second floor of this boat, and, of course, I didn't do it because we couldn't wear our swimming suits that day. So, yes.

Ice: Okay. So, at this camp is it...like you have like tents at a scout camp, or you have lodges or cabins?

Arnold: We have dormitories. The women sleep together and the men sleep together; there's no couples.

Ice: Okay.

Arnold: And, we're not allowed out to smoke or drink at this camp.

Ice: Okay. And, what about other aspects of getting around and cane travel. One of the things is the curb cuts on the corners which makes it hard to tell, do you want to talk about that?

Arnold: Yes. Downtown, when you go downtown in Cedar Rapids, the streets are all flat to the curb. They used to be raised up where you could tell where the curb was. Well, now you can't. Everything's flat, and it's very, very hard to find where you're going, where the curb is, where the street is. So, sometimes you're out into the street, and yes, it's very hard to get around downtown. Otherwise, I don't have a problem with it. In the area that I live I'm on a four lane street and they do have the curbs cut out, but they go down and up, so I know where I'm at.

Ice: Okay. And, any other comments you have about how things have changed for blind people over the years, the technology or job opportunities. Have you seen changes over the years or?

Arnold: Well, when I first started...when I went to the Department, all they had was the Word Perfect Program, and since those 22 years since I've been to the Department, you got the JAWS system; you can do just about anything on the computer. The only thing you can't do is send pictures across the Internet, because the JAWS system will not do that, but anything else you can just about do. You can play games on there, special games that are for the blind. I have games that I play, like Battleship. I play Yahtzee and Poker and also I play Snakes and Ladders and Life and all that stuff, and it's very, very fun. I haven't downloaded some of the games that I've got, because I don't know how much I have left on my hard drive, but I hope to eventually get them all on there. But, yeah, through the years you couldn't do

that, but with the technology you can now. So, I really enjoy being on the computer, probably way too much.

Ice: Okay. It sounds like there are a variety of things you can do with the computer.

Arnold: Yes, there is.

Ice: Okay. And, back a little to reading Braille. Do the Braille dots ever wear down if there's something like say the Bible that you read over and over, does it ever get worn out?

Arnold: Sometimes, if they...if they're pressed together too hard I've noticed that sometimes some pages are kind of hard to read, but no not usually. It's always there to read.

Ice: Okay, very good. Do you have any other comments about your life as a blind person in Iowa? Anything about how job opportunities have changed for people or?

Arnold: I don't think they've really changed all that much. I mean there's not that much out there to be had to tell you the truth.

Ice: In this economy there isn't, yeah. Well, very good then. Thank you so much for your time.

21:43

(End of Recording)

Jo Ann Slayton

5/10/2011

